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Viewing cable 01CAIRO3757, EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS - PART 2: A POPULAR

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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SUBJECT: EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS - PART 2: A POPULAR
POLITICAL FORCE

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CLASSIFIED BY DCM RENO HARNISH FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) IN THIS, THE SECOND OF TWO CABLES ON EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD (MB), WE LOOK AT THE BANNED MOVEMENT'S POPULARITY AND ITS SOURCES. DESPITE INTERNAL TENSIONS AND IMPRISONMENT OF THE MOST DYNAMIC OF ITS YOUNG LEADERS SINCE THE MID-1990'S, THE MB HAS ENJOYED AN UPSURGE IN POPULARITY, WINNING 17 PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY (PA) SEATS IN THE FALL 2000 ELECTIONS AND A RETURN TO THE BOARD OF THE BAR SYNDICATE IN FEBRUARY ELECTIONS. REASONS FOR THEIR POPULARITY ARE MANY; AMONG THEM ARE PERCEPTIONS THAT THEY ARE NOT CORRUPT, THEY ARE THE ONLY REAL POLITICAL OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT AND RULING NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY, AND THAT THEY HAVE AN EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATION AND DISCIPLINED MEMBERSHIP.

¶2. (C) PUBLIC OUTREACH TO ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS HAS INCREASED MB POPULARITY WHICH IS STRONGEST AMONG THE POOR. BUT THEY ARE NOT UNIVERSALLY RESPECTED. INTELLECTUALS - WHETHER SECULAR OR RELIGIOUS - MISTRUST THE GROUP AND QUESTION ITS POLITICAL VIABILITY IN A DEMOCRACY AND ITS RELIGIOUS CREDENTIALS. DETRACTORS CLAIM THERE IS CORRUPTION WITHIN MB RANKS AND CONTINUE TO SUSPECT THAT IT HAS A CAPACITY FOR VIOLENCE.

13. (C) MB INDEPENDENTS ELECTED TO THE PA LAST FALL TRIED BRIEFLY TO COEXIST WITH THE GOVERNMENT, BUT THE EFFORT WAS SHORT-LIVED. IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, THE MB HAVE TAKEN ON KEY GOVERNMENT MINISTERS DURING PA SESSIONS AND HAVE AROUSED PUBLIC SENTIMENT WITH THEIR STRONG ANTI-GOVERNMENT POSITIONS ON DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL ISSUES, PARTICULARLY THOSE RELATING TO ISRAEL AND STRIDENT SUPPORT FOR THE PALESTINIANS. THE GOVERNMENT HAS RESPONDED, MAKING CLEAR THAT IT, NOT THE MB, IS SETTING THE POLITICAL AGENDA. END SUMMARY

POPULAR REACTIONS TO THE MB

14. (C) DESPITE GOVERNMENT REPRESSION AND THEIR OWN INTERNAL PROBLEMS (SEE REFTEL) IN RECENT YEARS, EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERS (MB) ARE ENJOYING AN UPSURGE IN POPULARITY. THEIR SUCCESS IN THE FALL 2000 PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY (PA) ELECTIONS, ALBEIT AS INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES, AND IN THE LAWYERS' SYNDICATE ELECTIONS IN FEBRUARY, ATTEST TO THIS. DESPITE AN INTENSIVE CAMPAIGN OF ARRESTS AND HARASSMENT, OF 40 MB INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES FOR THE PA, 17 WON SEATS. IN THE LAWYERS' SYNDICATE ELECTIONS MB CANDIDATES WON 8 OF 24 SEATS ON THE BOARD. IN AN ERA OF PERCEIVED VAST CORRUPTION, HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH AND PRIVILEGES, AND OF ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, THE MB ARE GAINING GROUND. MANY EGYPTIANS SYMPATHIZE WITH THE SIMPLE, DIRECT MESSAGE, "ISLAM IS THE SOLUTION," AS WELL AS WITH THE IMAGES IT PROJECTS REGARDING ITS PURITY OF RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES. ACCORDING TO ITS LEADERS, THE MB ADVOCATE STRONGER ISLAMIC INFLUENCE IN SOCIETY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE. INTERESTED IN THE COMMON WELFARE OF THE AVERAGE EGYPTIAN, THEY PROJECT THEMSELVES AND ARE PERCEIVED BY MANY AS THE ANTITHESIS OF A CORRUPT, WEALTHY, SECULAR RULING ELITE.

15. (C) WHILE MANY, PARTICULARLY AMONG THE POOREST, BELIEVE THE MB SINCERE IN ITS OBJECTIVES, MANY ISLAMIST AND SECULAR INTELLECTUALS WITH WHOM WE SPOKE BELIEVE THE SIMPLICITY OF THEIR MESSAGE CONCEALS A POLICY VACUUM AT BEST, OR NEFARIOUS INTENTIONS AT WORST. ANTI-MB INTELLECTUALS CLAIM THAT THE ORGANIZATION IS POISED AT ANY OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO USE VIOLENCE TO ACHIEVE ITS OBJECTIVES. TOO LITTLE, THEY SAY, IS KNOWN ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION'S STRUCTURE AND POLITICS (SEE REFTEL). FOR INSTANCE, WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE MB GOVERNING BOARD AND WHAT DECISIONS ARE THEY MAKING? LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE SIZE AND COMPOSITION OF ITS MEMBERSHIP AND LESS ABOUT THEIR STRATEGY FOR SPREADING MB INFLUENCE AND IDEAS IN EGYPTIAN SOCIETY.

THE ONLY OPPOSITION IN TOWN

16. (C) AFTER THE GOVERNMENT'S TARGETING OF THE MB IN 1994 AND 1995, THE ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVELY WENT UNDERGROUND UNTIL 2000 WHEN SOME OF THE TOP YOUNG LEADERS WERE RELEASED FROM PRISON. ONE ACADEMIC ARGUED THAT THE MB HAD TO SHOW ITS FACE TO SURVIVE. "THEY HAD NO CHOICE. THEY NEEDED TO PROVE THAT THE CRACKDOWN HAS NOT BROKEN THEM AND THAT THEY CONTINUE TO EXIST AS A VIABLE MOVEMENT." DESPITE THE PRE-ELECTION CRACKDOWN, THE MB PROVIDED DISCIPLINED SUPPORT TO ITS CANDIDATES IN THE FALL 2000 PA ELECTIONS, UNLIKE OTHER PARTIES INCLUDING THE RULING NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (NDP).

17. (C) THE MB'S INFLUENCE WAS AMPLIFIED BY THE LACK OF A SECULAR OPPOSITION POLITICAL MOVEMENT IN EGYPT WHICH CONSTITUTED A CREDIBLE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE TO THE RULING PARTY AT ELECTION TIME. ACADEMICS ESTIMATE THE POLITICALLY ACTIVE SECTOR OF THIS SOCIETY RANGES BETWEEN 2-8%, DEPENDING UPON THE TIME (E.G. ELECTIONS) AND THE ISSUE (E.G. CORRUPTION). IN THE FALL 2000 PA ELECTIONS, MB CANDIDATES CAPTURED THE POPULAR TIDE OF VOTES AGAINST THE (RULING) NDP IN THE SMALL NUMBER OF DISTRICTS WHERE THEY FIELDDED CANDIDATES. DESPITE MANY ARRESTS, HARSH TREATMENT OF MB MEMBERS AND SYMPATHIZERS AND ITS STATUS AS AN ILLEGAL PARTY, THE 40 MB CANDIDATES RUNNING AS "INDEPENDENTS" MANAGED TO WIN 17 PA SEATS. THEY RECENTLY CINCHED ONE-THIRD (8) OF THE

BOARD SEATS IN THE EGYPTIAN BAR SYNDICATE IN ITS FIRST ELECTIONS SINCE 1992. THEY CONTINUE TO HAVE SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE IN ALL EGYPTIAN LABOR AND PROFESSIONAL SYNDICATES, MANY HOLDING SEATS ON UNION BOARDS FROZEN FOR THAT VERY REASON BY THE GOVERNMENT IN 1996. WHILE NO MB POPULARITY POLLS HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED, ESTIMATES THAT THEY COULD GAIN 20 TO 30 PERCENT OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS IN A FREE AND FAIR ELECTION SEEM PLAUSIBLE.

STRONG POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND DISCIPLINE

18. (C) IN THE FALL 2000 PA ELECTIONS AND AGAIN IN THE BAR SYNDICATE IN FEBRUARY, THE MB DEMONSTRATED BETTER ORGANIZATION AND MORE PARTY DISCIPLINE THAN OTHER PARTIES AND CANDIDATES. A FORMER DIRECTOR OF STATE SECURITY TOLD "ROSE EL YOUSSEF" MAGAZINE ON APRIL 21, 2001 THAT THE VICTORY OF THE MB IN THE PA ELECTIONS "WAS NOT A RESULT OF THEIR STRENGTH IN PROPAGATING THEIR IDEOLOGY, BUT (WAS) A RESULT OF THE PASSIVENESS AND LACK OF ORGANIZATION OF OTHER FORCES ON THE POLITICAL SCENE." NDP AND OPPOSITION PARTY OFFICIALS HAVE COME TO THE SAME REALIZATION. ISLAMIC AND SECULAR INTELLECTUALS DOUBT THAT WERE THE MB TO GAIN A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE PARLIAMENT THAT THEY WOULD BE REELECTED TO SECOND TERMS, BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO MEANINGFUL MESSAGE. THE GOVERNMENT PREVENTED THEM FROM RUNNING IN THE SHURA COUNCIL (UPPER HOUSE) ELECTIONS HELD MAY 16-JUNE 12 BY ARRESTING CANDIDATES AND SUPPORTERS IN PRE-ELECTION SWEEPS, A RE-PLAY OF STEPS TAKEN BEFORE THE PA ELECTIONS. OF A POSSIBLE 20 INDEPENDENT MB CANDIDATES, ONLY ONE REMAINED BY ELECTION TIME TO RUN FOR A SHURA COUNCIL SEAT. HE DID NOT WIN. THE SUCCESS OF THE MB WHEN IT IS PERMITTED TO RUN IS DUE IN PART TO THE INABILITY OF THE RULING AND OPPOSITION PARTIES TO ORGANIZE OR IMPROVE PARTY DISCIPLINE AND TO PUT FORWARD POPULAR CANDIDATES.

OUTREACH KEY TO POPULARITY

19. (U) MUSLIM BROTHERS' OUTREACH IS DIRECTED TOWARDS THE POOR BUT THEIR SERVICES ARE NOT LIMITED ONLY TO THE POOR. THEY ARE ACTIVELY DELIVERING EDUCATION, HEALTH CARE AND LEGAL SERVICES TO THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD IT. THEY ARE INVOLVED IN ALL THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (SYNDICATES) AND ARE THE BACKBONE OF THE EGYPTIAN MEDICAL AND TEACHERS' SYNDICATES. WITHIN THE SYNDICATES THEY HAVE REACHED OUT TO A BROAD AUDIENCE, BY FOR INSTANCE, OFFERING MEMBERS REDUCED PRICE MEDICAL COVERAGE. IN THE JOURNALISTS' SYNDICATE, THE MB HELPED MEMBERS TO GET INCREASED BENEFITS INCLUDING SUBSIDIZED HOUSING AND CREDIT CARDS (WITH A US\$1,500 LIMIT), A BENEFIT VIEWED VERY POSITIVELY EVEN BY ANTI-MB JOURNALISTS.

110. (U) DOCTORS AND NURSES PROVIDE INEXPENSIVE, SOMETIMES FREE MEDICAL CARE TO THE POOR FOR WHOM THERE ARE NO OR INSUFFICIENT GOVERNMENT SERVICES. WHILE THE MB SOMETIMES OPERATE MEDICAL CLINICS AT MOSQUES, THE LACK OF INFORMATION ABOUT WHO IS ACTUALLY AN MB MEMBER HAS SOMETIMES RESULTED IN BENEFICIARIES THINKING THE MB HAS HELPED THEM WHEN IT HAS NOT. THE MB-DOMINATED DOCTORS' SYNDICATE HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR MEMBERS OF ALL SYNDICATES TO OBTAIN REASONABLY PRICED HEALTH INSURANCE. THE MB REPORTEDLY PROVIDES STIPENDS, COVERING LIVING AND BOOK EXPENSES, TO POOR MB STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITIES. MB SHOP OWNERS PROVIDE SUBSIDIZED, SOMETIMES FREE, FOOD AND CLOTHING TO THE NEEDY IN IMPOVERISHED AREAS. THE MB IS FILLING A GAP IN A SOCIETY WITH FEW GOVERNMENT SERVICES AND POOR ADMINISTRATION OF THOSE THAT EXIST.

111. (C) MANY KNOWN MUSLIM BROTHER LEADERS ARE FROM EDUCATED, SOMETIMES WEALTHY FAMILY BACKGROUNDS. THE LEADERS ARE INVOLVED IN MOST ASPECTS OF PROFESSIONAL AND COMMERCIAL LIFE IN EGYPT: MEDICINE, LAW, ENGINEERING, EDUCATION, AND BUSINESS, FROM SMALL STORES AND BASIC SERVICES TO HEADING LARGE COMPANIES. A LARGE AMOUNT OF THEIR FINANCING IS THOUGHT TO COME FROM ABROAD, PRINCIPALLY FROM SAUDI SOURCES, INTERESTED IN PROMOTING A MORE CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS TREND

IN EGYPT.

CONTROVERSY ABOUNDS

¶12. (C) THE MB'S POPULAR IMAGE IS NOT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY. WHEN THE BAR SYNDICATE WAS JUDICIALLY SEQUESTERED IN 1996, IT WAS ON THE BASIS OF A COMPLAINT BY NON-MB LAWYERS THAT MB SYNDICAL LEADERS WERE DISPENSING THE SYNDICATE'S CONTRACTS AND LOANS TO MB SUPPORTERS, CHANNELING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND PROFITS TO MB COMPANIES. (IN THIS WAY, THEIR OPERATIONS MIMICRED THAT OF THE RULING PARTY.) NONETHELESS, THEY ARE BROADLY PERCEIVED AS MORE HONEST THAN THE RULING NDP.

¶13. (C) ONE PROFESSOR ASKED RHETORICALLY, "THINGS ARE SO BAD, COULD THEY (THE MB) REALLY BE ANY WORSE?" A WELL-KNOWN ISLAMIST LAWYER HOWEVER, TAKES ISSUE WITH THAT CONTENTION, "THEIR POPULARITY RESTS ON A SLOGAN... THEY HAVE NO ANSWERS, NO SOLUTIONS TO EGYPT'S VERY REAL PROBLEMS (PARTICULARLY) THE ECONOMIC CRISIS - THE MOST SERIOUS OF EGYPT'S PROBLEMS," HE STRESSED. ANALYSIS OF MB ACTIVITIES IN THE PA, HE AND OTHERS SAY, SUPPORTS THE CLAIM THAT THE MB HAS NO SOLUTIONS. "THE MB IS ABSORBED WITH PAROCHIAL, RELIGIOUS ISSUES RATHER THAN ISSUES OF NATIONAL CONSEQUENCE," A POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR ASSESSED. AN NDP PA MEMBER COMMENTED THAT MB MEMBERS ARE COMPLETELY IGNORANT OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURES, CONSEQUENTLY WASTING A GREAT DEAL OF THE ASSEMBLY'S TIME.

REGIONAL ISSUES WORK IN THEIR FAVOR

¶14. (C) REGIONAL POLITICS HAVE BOLSTERED THE MB'S IMAGE. RISING DISCONTENT OVER ISRAEL'S TREATMENT OF THE PALESTINIANS AND WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS A HALF-HEARTED RESPONSE BY ARAB LEADERS HAVE STRENGTHENED THE MB, WHO HAVE MADE A NAME FOR THEMSELVES AS STAUNCH SUPPORTERS OF THE PALESTINIANS. THEY ARE THE MAIN INSTIGATORS OF PRO-PALESTINIAN AND ANTI-ISRAEL/U.S. DEMONSTRATIONS ON THE CAMPUSES AND AT THE SYNDICATES AND ARE THE BENEFICIARIES OF POPULAR ANGER OVER THE AL AQSA INTIFADA. MANY OF OUR INTERLOCUTORS, INCLUDING AN EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENTIST, REMIND US THAT THE MB RIDE THE TIDE OF POPULAR CONCERNS: ANTI-CORRUPTION, PRO-PALESTINE, ANTI-ISRAEL AND THE PEACE PROCESS. THEY ARE USING THESE HOT ISSUES, HE ESTIMATES, TO "PENETRATE" STUDENT UNIONS AND PROFESSIONAL SYNDICATES. THE PROFESSOR, LIKE MANY EGYPTIANS, BELIEVES THE MB HAS NO STRATEGY PER SE OTHER THAN GAINING POWER. HE DOES NOT BELIEVE THEY ARE SUCCESSFUL IN INCREASING THEIR OUTREACH BEYOND A COMMITTED NUCLEUS, BUT HE BELIEVES THAT IS STILL MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN THE OUTREACH BY MOST POLITICAL PARTIES.

"OBJECTIVE OPPOSITION" TURNS SOUR

¶15. (C) DESPITE MASSIVE ARRESTS, TRIAL AND IMPRISONMENT OF RESPECTED MB LEADERS IN RECENT YEARS, THE ORGANIZATION CONTINUES. THE ELECTORAL VICTORY OF 17 MUSLIM BROTHERS IN THE FALL ELECTIONS REPRESENTS A CHALLENGE TO THE GOVERNMENT. MB'S ARE AN ILLEGAL BUT DE FACTO BLOC IN THE PARLIAMENT. INITIALLY, MB PARLIAMENTARIANS SEEMED TO PLAY THE GOVERNMENT'S GAME. OBSERVERS SPECULATED THAT A TRUCE OF SORTS HAD BEEN DECLARED BETWEEN THE MB AND STATE SECURITY. UNDER WHAT MB MP HAMDY HASSAN TERMED A POLICY OF "OBJECTIVE OPPOSITION" (TO GOVERNMENT POLICIES), HE TOLD AL AHRAM NEWSPAPER, "THE BROTHERHOOD'S DEPUTIES CALLED INTO QUESTION THE STATE'S PUBLISHING THREE "PORNOGRAPHIC" BOOKS, WHICH WERE CONSEQUENTLY WITHDRAWN TO AVOID A POTENTIALLY DAMAGING DEBATE." HE ADDED THAT THE MB DID NOT OBJECT TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S JANUARY 22 GOVERNMENT POLICY STATEMENT. "WE WANTED TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THE (MB) PRESENCE... SHOULD NOT TRIGGER EXCESSIVE FEARS. (OUR) PRESENCE DOES REALLY GO IN FAVOR OF DEMOCRACY AND NOT AGAINST IT..."

¶16. (C) HOWEVER, ON APRIL 21, THE 17 MB MP'S STORMED OUT OF

PARLIAMENT, PROTESTING THE SPEAKER'S REFUSAL TO GIVE THEM THE FLOOR TO RAISE THE ISSUE OF ARREST OF 2 MB SHURA COUNCIL CANDIDATES. FOLLOWING THIS CONFRONTATION, THE MB BLOC SUBMITTED TO THE SPEAKER A LONG LIST OF QUESTIONS "EMBARRASSING" TO THE GOVERNMENT, ACCORDING TO ONE PARLIAMENTARY REPORTER. THEY CALL UPON THE GOVERNMENT TO CANCEL THE "MISS EGYPT" PAGEANT; QUESTION THE MORALITY OF AN ARTICLE IN THE STATE-OWNED FILM MAGAZINE, "THE STARS"; ACCUSE THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR OF IGNORING VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS; AND REQUEST PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS PAUSE REGULARLY FOR PRAYERS. TARGETED MINISTERS INCLUDE THE POWERFUL MINISTERS OF AGRICULTURE YOUSSEF WALY, OF INFORMATION SAFWAT SHERIF AND CULTURE MINISTER FAROUQ HOSNI. THEY HAVE CONTINUED TO GARNER PUBLIC SUPPORT WITH TIRADES AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT, CORRUPTION, AND AGAINST EDUCATION MINISTER BAHAA EDDIN FOR REASSIGNING THOUSANDS OF TEACHERS TO ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS BECAUSE THEY WERE MB SUPPORTERS AT A TIME WHEN THE RATE OF ILLITERACY AND LACK OF EDUCATION ARE PROFOUND SOCIAL CONCERNS.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

¶17. (C) TO CONTINUE TO GROW BEYOND ITS CURRENT SUPPORTERS, THE MB DEPENDS ON UNREST IN THE REGION, POPULAR DISCONTENT OVER GOVERNMENT MISMANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY, CORRUPTION AND UNEMPLOYMENT. THE AVERAGE EGYPTIAN BELIEVES THAT THINGS CAN'T REALLY GET MUCH WORSE WERE THE MB MORE INFLUENTIAL. THEY MIGHT EVEN GIVE SOMETHING BACK TO THE PEOPLE. THE MIDDLE CLASS JUST "WANTS TO GET BY" WITHOUT INTERFERENCE FROM THE GOVERNMENT OR RELIGIOUS TYPES. INTELLECTUALS TEND TO BE STRIDENTLY ANTI-MB. AS AN NDP POLITICIAN AND JOURNALIST COMMENTED, "IF ONLY 6 PERCENT OF EGYPTIANS ARE POLITICIZED, A LARGE PERCENTAGE OF THEM ARE PRO-MB." HOWEVER, HE AND OUR OTHER INTERLOCUTORS BELIEVE THAT THE MB ARE NOT SO POPULAR NOR IS THEIR BASE OF SUPPORT SO SIGNIFICANT THAT THEY COULD TAKE OVER THE REINS OF POWER TODAY, OR IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) WHILE THE MB HAS HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO RESUME A PLACE ON THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM, THEIR POWER AND INFLUENCE REMAIN LIMITED. STATE SECURITY FORCES MAINTAIN THE MB IN A TIGHT VISE SINCE THE BAR SYNDICATE ELECTIONS AND HAVE MADE IT CLEAR THAT THEY WILL WIN NO MORE POWER OFFICIALLY FOR THE TIME BEING. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE MB REPRESENTS A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE GOE. IT IS NOT CAPABLE OF SEIZING POWER AND MANY OF ITS YOUNGER MEMBERS SEEM TO FAVOR POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT THROUGH ELECTIONS. IN THE CONTINUED ABSENCE OF SECULAR OPPOSITION POLITICAL PARTIES THE MB WILL CONTINUE TO REPRESENT FOR MANY THE ONLY VIABLE POLITICAL OPPOSITION.

HARNISH